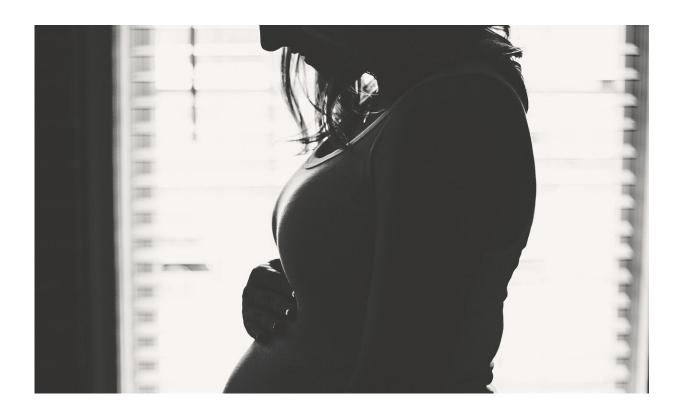# Community health workers' dental intervention benefits underserved pregnant people, study shows

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A study aiming to assess an innovative "SMARTeeth" program that provides a digital tool-enabled oral health screening for underserved pregnant women at an obstetric office facilitated by community health workers (CHWs) was presented at the 102nd General Session of the IADR, which was held in conjunction with the 53rd Annual Meeting of the American Association for Dental, Oral, and Craniofacial Research and the 48th Annual Meeting of the Canadian Association for Dental Research, on March 13-16, 2024, in New Orleans, LA, U.S..

The abstract, "Smart Connected Oral Health Community (SMARTeeth)" was presented during the "e-Oral Health Network Research" Poster Session that took place on Thursday, March 14, 2024 at 3:45 p.m. Central Standard Time (UTC-6).

The study, by Nisreen Al Jallad of the Eastman Institute for Oral Health, Rochester, NY, U.S., had community health workers (CHWs) use an intraoral camera to take a full set of intraoral photos for pregnant women when they visited their prenatal care providers during pregnancy. Afterward, a virtual dental consultation with a dentist assessed screening findings and treatment plans. Subsequently, patients were triaged for in-person visits. Training for CHWs included utilizing electronic medical and dental records for patient registration and documentation as well as developing capability of taking diagnostic intraoral photos.

From April to September 2023, 150 underserved pregnant women (average age: 29±6 years) participated, representing diverse racial backgrounds: 53.1% Black, 36.4% white, 6.3% Asian, and 4.2% other races, with 13.8% identifying as Hispanic. Among screened pregnant women, 72% had urgent dental issues, including toothache, broken teeth, and severe gum bleeding with average decayed teeth (2.4±2.5).

The competency of CHWs was evaluated by a dentist who found that 73% of total photos, 84% of front teeth photos, and 91% of occlusal arch photos were diagnostically useful. CHWs faced challenges in capturing photos of posterior teeth, with diagnostic rates of 80% for the buccal side of premolars and molars, and 73% for occlusal surfaces. Additionally, diagnostic rates were 84% for buccal sides and 64% for occlusal surfaces.

Conducting virtual dental visit triage effectively facilitated in-office treatment delivery, including extraction, pulpectomy, scaling and root planning, and restorations during the first office visit. Oral health screening outside of the dental office by CHWs holds promise for improving access and utilization of prenatal dental care among underserved population.

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